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ABSTRACT

Work and play are parts of the same whole and the detachment of the notion of effort from the idea of play has had confusing and dangerous consequences--dangerous, because the opportunities for children to engage in vital, self-selected play have been diminished in our society. This has been done partly through deliberate, conscious choice on the part of the adults who govern children's lives, and partly as a consequence of the structure of contemporary society, which increasingly distances children from the natural sources of their imaginative play: from knowledge and experience of their parents' work and of the general world of work: from the institutions, services, and organizations of society. Thus children today lack sufficient models for make-believe individual and social play. The first significant misunderstanding of what play is and does came into being with the emergence of the notion of childhood as a developmental stage during which the child learns through preparation how to take his or her proper place as an adult in the world of work and family life. With these changes and others, children's play was gradually shaped to emphasize the virtues of prudence, frugality, piety, and work. Now, more than ever, due to the rapid rate of social change we need to encourage opportunities to engage in the kind of play which promotes problem-solving and adaptive capacities and to emphasize less programs and tools designed to develop specific, morally approved capacities and skills. (Author/SS)

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PLAY FOR YOUR LIFE: The Stakes are Survival

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The concept of play--of what it comprises and our attitudes toward it--of who should be engaging in it--when--and for what purpose, has developed in the modern, Western world largely, almost entirely, I think, in relationship to the also developing concept of work. Play includes the activities we engage in that are not work....leftovers, as it were, which we may undertake after our effortful and virtuous work is done. Work means, almost exclusively in the modern world, work for a living. Housewive's work, though unpaid, belongs in this category.

That the concept of effort and virtue have come to be bonded so firmly to the definition of work, has caused them, perforce, to be loosed from the idea of play. As play is what work is not, work and play have come to be understood as polar or opposite conditions; Black-white, thin -fat, day-night, work-play...almost as if they were natural opposites. I would like to suggest that work and play are parts of the same whole viewed from a different moral perspective, and that the detachment of the notion of effort from the idea of play has had confusing and dangerous consequences--dangerous, because the opportunities for children to engage in vital, self-selected play have been diminished in our society.

They have been diminished, and severely so, partly through deliberate, conscious choice on the part of the adults who govern children's lives, and partly as a consequence of the structure of contemporary society, which increasingly distances children from the natural sources of their imaginative

play; from knowledge and experience of their parents' work and of the general world of work; from the institutions, services, and organizations of society. Thus children today lack sufficient models for make-believe individual and social play.

Young children's opportunities for imaginative problem-solving play have also been eroded by well-meaning, but, I think, insufficiently thought-out attempts to put play back in early childhood education and training by making early schooling (that is to say, work, child's work), fun (that is to say, effortless).

I could not and shall not attempt to trace in history all of the entwined threads pertaining to play and work, as these have twisted around each other, playing their part in building up the great snarled ball of twine we call social structure or history in progress. But I would like to identify what seem to me to be the main strands in this development, because, I think, the moment of urgency is on us. It is imperative for us to restore real effortful play to children's lives; and there is a great deal we can do--as parents, teachers, researchers and developers of theory, as formers of policy--to accomplish that goal.

The first significant misunderstanding of what play is and does, and the first significant limitations on it, came into being, and paradoxically so, I think, with the very emergence of the notion of childhood as a developmental stage, as a process taking place over an extended period of time during which the child learns through preparation how to take his proper place as an adult in the world of work and family life. And as a consequence of this novel, as it was, idea, there also arose an interest in the child as a person in process, and beliefs about how to prepare him or her for adulthood.

I would like to draw on some observations of Philippe Ariès, in his Centuries of Childhood (not to discuss his arguable conclusions regarding family life and a contemporary loss of individualism, as compared to life in the middle ages), but to develop a somewhat related notion. As Ariès details, it was not until well into the 17th century that the concept of childhood as a prolonged process existed in Western society. All during the middle and high middle ages, the concept of the child, as we think of it now, did not exist. Citing examples from France, England, Holland and elsewhere on the continent during the 13th, 14th and 15th centuries, Ariès writes:"As soon as the child could live without the constant solicitude of his Nanny, or cradle-rocker, he belonged to adult society." He is referring to children of ages three, four and five. By this age children's dress, their food, the work they were able to do, the games and pastimes they played, were like those of the adults and were fully shared with adults. Indeed, many of the games which have come down to us from those ancient times, and which only children play today, were adult games in which children as they were old enough, also took part.

During this period of history as Ariès writes:

> "Work did not have so much importance in the public mind, it did not have the existential value which we have given it for something like a hundred years. One can scarcely say it had the same meaning. On the other hand, games and amusements extended far beyond the furtive moments we allow them. They formed one of the principal means employed by society to draw its collective bonds closer, to feel united. This was true of nearly all

games and pastimes, but the social role was more obvious in the great seasonal and traditional festivals."

These festivals and their traditional patterns, as he notes, were not merely rural activities (as some have assumed, since they have been studied principally by people interested in folklore) but, as he describes, "they concerned the whole of society, of whose vitality they were a manifestation.

My purpose in citing Ariès is surely not to claim that life for children, or for adults, was better in the middle ages than it is today. I would like to note, however, that though people of that time were ignorant of, and indifferent to, the nature and needs of childhood as we have come to recognize these today, and though the vital functions of play went unrecognized, at least unrationalized, the play-work was taking place. However hard and abruptly terminated childhood was in the middle ages, children were being prepared for adulthood, as a side-effect, as it were, through play and games shared with adults, through life shared with adults. Not only did play serve to maintain the vigor and cohesiveness of the social structure, as Ariès points out, but it also served to effect the many individual benefits of play for children, which we recognize today. These include: problem-solving and developing strategies (in a protected arena) for coping with novelty and change later on.

Whatever the beneficial side-effects of this unanalyzed social structure, they were lost with the many faceted developments of the so-called, "age of exploration and discovery" (the 16th and 17th centuries), the "age of reason" (the 18th century), and following that the "age of evolution and revolution" (the 19th century to the present) with its enthronement of

the idea of the perfectibility of man and society. Born in this ambitious flux was the idea of the child as a person in process, a person progressing toward a conceivably perfectible adulthood, which progress depended upon the kind of training applied to the clean slate of infancy and childhood. The idea of the importance of education, therefore, also came into flower, and the family's main role became increasingly defined, as it had not been previously, as the principal educator of the young.

With all of these developments, play got lost in the shuffle, or more precisely, deliberately dropped from the deck. For the parent's role as educator arose during the period of the increasingly widespread impact of the puritan ethic. Its emphasis on the morality, indeed, the sanctity of hard work, self discipline, and critical, that is to say, punitive or hostile self-examination, and its condemnation of play, dancing, games of change, theater--all such supposedly frivolous, even immoral, activities led to a climate in which unguided child's play became increasingly suspect. This is not to say that children were forbidden to play, but that play was viewed as a tool for teaching young children the virtues of adult life. By the 19th century, the general mix of beliefs, ideals and fears informing society, including belief in the primacy of education and moral training in achieving the potential perfectibility of man, led the adult directors of children's play to shape it so as to emphasize the virtues of prudence, frugality, piety, work.

Implicit in Lewis Carroll's Alice in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass, written just about 100 years ago, is a delightfully ironic attitude toward the didactic piety of adult-structured children's play, games and stories. His parodies of children's verses are to the point. The

morality verse, popular at the time--and still popular--which begins, "How doth the little busy bee improve each shining hour," is changed by Lewis Carroll to "How doth the little crocodile improve its shining tail and pour the waters of the Nile on every golden scale." The crocodile--selfish hedonist--whose motto might be carpe diem, and I'm alright, Jack, too bad about you--is the very antithesis of the prudent, saving, cooperative bee. Or, take the character of the Duchess, who ends all of her absurd observations by saying, "And the moral of that is." To Alice's puzzled suggestion about one senseless remark, "Perhaps it hasn't got a moral," the Duchess replies, "Everything's got a moral, if only you can find it." That attitude is still very much with us today, as the explicit or implicit motivation behind the way we raise and teach our young children, behind a good many of the play situations we set up for them.

True, the people who have studied the fascinating internal structure, the logic of individual human development, and the role of play in fostering healthy development, know that play which permits children to make their own discoveries, to invent and practice their own skills, to draw, eventually, their own morals, works naturally to prepare children for adulthood. Indeed, excepting for children who have been stunted in their capacity to play due to acquired or inborn illness or injury, who do need help in learning to play, children do not need to be taught to play. They do need a welcoming environment in order to make the earliest exploratory--mentally, physically, emotionally exploratory--steps in play. And they need companions in play; first, adults, and some tools, playthings, as well. But they do not need, in most cases, morally structured, goal-oriented directions for play. As

you know, the more self-directed the play, the better. All real play is active, in some sense, and full of effort. Yet in the emerging, diverging definitions of play and work with the linking, as it seems to me, of the attribute, effort, to the idea of work, and its consequent detachment from the idea of play, we have come to act as if we believed play were effortless.

This completely false notion persists today, as we see, in our television "educational" entertainments for children, and the way in which they present material to be learned. We see it, too, even, unfortunately, in our attempts to reform early school curriculum in order to rid it of some of the stifling rigidities of older systems of teaching, which failed to take into account children's needs to make their own discoveries. Unfortunately, as we attempted to correct this ill, a newer teaching style which seemed to embody the notion that facts and skills can be acquired without effort, has come into wide use in early childhood and nursery classrooms.

Clearly, the roots of the errors we are now coping with in our attitude and behavior regarding play and work are twisted and go way back. Yet, also clearly, not only have most peope survived to play another day, but during this same period some have made important discoveries about the specific ways in which play works to promote the well-being and the survival of the individual. Evidently, the creativity of the developmental psychologists and other scientists who have made these discoveries (by means of considerable effort plus playful leaps of the imagination), has not been starved by a climate inhospitable to play.

Why, then, do I think there is any special urgency now--and I do--to the limitations embedded in our culture on young children's opportunities to engage in the kind of play which promotes their problem-solving, adaptive capacities. Precisely because of the increasingly rapid rate of social and cultural change, which is probably the single most characteristic feature of contemporary life, and because the changes increasingly lengthen the distance between children and the workings of society. These-in their impersonality are hard for adults to comprehend and accommodate themselves to, and quite impossible for children to make sense of, to find a place in.

In Jerome Bruner's article "Nature and the Uses of Immaturity," (first published in 1972 in the American Psychologist and later reprinted in the volume, Play, edited by Bruner, Jolly, and Sylva), Bruner notes that in a society in which the rate of change is rapid and accelerating, early childhood play--social play--which normally provides the means for the transmission of social-cultural attitudes, goals and knowledge from generation to generation is no longer effective in that function. Instead, that function of social play--to help children develop strategies for coping with the environment in a risk-free situation--is inhibited, due to the incomprehensibility of the adult world, the lack of sensible models of adult activity.

Bruner goes on to invoke the concept of "deep play" as formulated by the 19th century political philosopher, Jeremy Bentham, to discuss what happens frequently in the adolescence and early adolescence in our society, as a consequence of such play-deprivation in early childhood. Bentham defined the notion of deep play in discussing what kind of

behavior properly belonged in a rational, utilitarian society, which meant for him what kind of behavior was, if rational, therefore moral, or if irrational, immoral. He defined deep play as activity in which the risks of the game, of the activity, are so much greater than the possible benefits to be gained that the activity is irrational, not utilitarian, and, therefore, immoral. Bruner, making use of this concept, discusses the widespread current phenomenon of the dropout, anti-social, adolescent or preadolescent in its many manifestations--the drug user, heavy drinker, the teenager with a tendency toward criminal, or suicidal, behavior, the anti-establishment, "acting-out" young person in our society. Such young people, Bruner hypothesizes, who are engaging in what, according to Bentham's definition, is clearly deep play, do so as a consequence of having been denied by the nature of our society--fast-changing, impersonal, unknowledgable to children--sufficient opportunities for "risk-free" social play in their early years. Bruner does claim some optimism about certain aspects of this adolescent or preadolescent deep play. He observes that some of the manifestations of dropout behavior, incorporating, as they often do, idealistic attitudes, may lead to the development of sound, adaptive, healthy lifestyles. He even postulates the emergence of a new, intermediate stage of human development toward competent adulthood in the persons of deep-playing, adolescents and preadolescents.

It seems to me that the path from there to here is too dangerous. Adolescents and preadolescents engaged in deep play are at terrible risk. As, indeed, is the community. And many of them, as all of us know, are wiped-out and wasted, to use their terminology, along the way. I think, if you find merit in Bruner's argument, and I find it very

suggestive, we can and should do more than merely hang in there as a way of helping deep-playing adolescents come out safely with strengthened capacities to cope with and change their environment to their liking. I think we should deliberately interpret the world to young children--its social structure, its services and institutions. By visits and excursions to its work places, by playful and imaginative games and stories shared with children, by the encouraging of lots and lots of unstructured, free playtimes, we can give children opportunities to incorporate this raw material into their games and fantasies, we can increase their comprehension of their relatedness to the world. I think we adults--parents, nursery and early elementary teachers, researchers and designers of theory, legislators and funders of day care and early childhood programs--all of us must use our imaginations to restore to children the tools and the time to engage in their own make-believe, imaginative play.

My own bias is to offer children, in our homes, classrooms, and on television, if we can figure out how to do it, more opportunities for self-selected, exploratory play and fewer sophisticated systems, that is to say, fewer programs and tools designed to develop specific, morally approved capacities and skills.

One of the most heartening and attractive aspects of contemporary life in this country is the increasing extent to which adults, singly or in naturally cohesive groups, are trying to counter the otherness and machine-rule of our society. Block associations planting trees; neighborhood groups organizing community services; people everywhere reviving the production and sale of handcrafts and arts (one of the expressions, of course, of the one-ness of play and work)--all these

activities express our own need, to comprehend our world, to feel we belong to it and it to us, to control and take satisfaction in our lives. A deliberate effort to include our children in such activities and to enlarge their opportunities to do their own special thing--purposeful, self-selected playing--must also help them to comprehension, belonging, control--and satisfaction.